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RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4190
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2469
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SUBJECT: TASHKENTERS QUIETLY SEETHING OVER FATE OF ORPHANS
AS STATUE DISAPPEARS

11. (SBU) Summary: A statue commemorating the adoption of orphans from the Western front during World War II was removed from a prominent Tashkent square in the dead of night on April 12. The move rankled ethnic Russians, who viewed the move as an assault on the city's history. Even ethnic Uzbek residents were puzzled by the statue's abrupt disappearance long after the flurry of nationalistic changes subsided, especially since it was a much-loved city landmark. Soon thereafter the Tashkent City Government also announced that the the downtown square in which the statue had been located was also renamed "Independence Square" vice "People's Friendship Square." Additionally, authorities renamed the prominent Pushkin Street, along with several other thoroughfares in town. The renewed effort to cleanse the city of its Russian vestiges will not likely spur ethnic Russians to protest, but they do consider it a needless slap in the face and Russia may view it the same way. There is some speculation that President Karimov is deliberately trying to put distance between Uzbekistan and Russia, but it is too soon to say for sure. End summary.

Orphans are Hauled Away

12. (SBU) Tashkenters woke up on April 12 to discover that a beloved landmark had been stealthily removed in the dead of night with no advance notice. A statue commemorating the generous community spirit of Tashkent residents who adopted Soviet children orphaned in the Western front during World War II - in particular a family who adopted 15 children - vanished from the Soviet-era "Square of the Friendship of Peoples." News quickly circulated by word of mouth and a story also appeared in BBC Monitoring on April 18. Numerous lifelong residents and ethnic Russians with whom poloff spoke in recent weeks expressed anger about the decision, which some attributed solely to the city government while others blamed the President ("there is only one man who has power that matters").

13. (SBU) Ethnic Russian residents have long since accepted the post-Soviet imposition of nationalistic Uzbek monuments: Tamerlane astride his horse, the poet Alisher Navoiy with his quill, and a series of new street names and subway stations. So why, they are asking each other bitterly, after all these

years of independence are authorities now trying to delete what is left? They feel the city fathers missed the point that the statue symbolized generosity of the human spirit and was not particularly Soviet or un-Uzbek. Even ethnic Uzbeks are shaking their heads over the loss of the city landmark. To add insult to injury, the statue will reportedly be reinstalled outside the hippodrome bazaar, which ethnic Russians note is symbolically just outside the city limits, as though there is no place for them in town.

How Many Independence Squares Do We Need?

¶4. (SBU) The purported reason for the relocation of the statue was that the "Square of the Friendship of Peoples" is being rechristened - out of the blue - as "Istiqlol Maydoni" (Independence Square). Exasperated Tashkent denizens point out that there is already a prominent "Mustaqqilik Maydoni" (also meaning Independence Square), formerly Lenin Square, just one kilometer away. This is in addition to numerous other references to independence using various Uzbek synonyms in bus stations, public buildings, metro stops, a public holiday, and the omnipresent quotes of President Karimov.

Is Pushkin Next?

¶5. (SBU) A few weeks after the statue disappeared, the press announced that the prominent Pushkin Street in the capital would be renamed, what else, Independence Avenue. A list of

other less prominent name changes was also published in the "Evening Tashkent" newspaper on May 15, but it is Pushkin's fate which has Tashkenters' blood boiling. The street is graced by a large statue of Pushkin, and most expect the 19th century writer to be chased from his pedestal and the corresponding metro station to be renamed. (Note: Pushkin Street intersects the former Maxim Gorkiy Street, which has long ago been renamed "Buyuk Ipak Yo'li" (Great Silk Road) Street, but most in Tashkent still use the old name. End note.) Uzbek citizens who have visited the U.S. note the irony that even Washington, DC has a statue of Pushkin as a great world writer, and they lament that he could be a casualty of a new nationalistic trend even after surviving the first cut in the early nineties.

Comment:

¶6. (SBU) The unexpected round of heavy-handed nationalistic name changes will not spur outraged street protests by ethnic Russians in Tashkent, who have long since learned to turn the other cheek. However, this has caused increased discontentment and may lead more ethnic Russians to conclude there is no future for them in Uzbekistan. It seems that ethnic Uzbeks also find the changes unnecessary, so the efforts are not meant to cater to their nationalistic fervor.

Just as ethnic Russians are irked, so too may Russia itself get a chilly vibe from this spurious de-Russification of Tashkent. There is some speculation on the Internet that President Karimov is deliberately trying to show distance and even displeasure with Russian policies now that President Putin has changed jobs, but it is too soon to tell whether these geographical name changes reflect this or not.

NORLAND